

Benefits from a County Bridge Fund

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In selecting subjects for the Road School, we always try to choose those that affect all counties. I can think of no subject that is any more a state-wide problem than that of our bridges, both state and county.

Changing traffic conditions have completely changed the requirements of our bridge structures. The coming of the truck, with its excessive loads and speed, has made the bridge problem entirely different from what it was only a few years ago.

Most of the bridges on our county roads were built from forty to sixty years ago. At that time ten tons were considered an exceptionally heavy load, and we never anticipated the speed of the trucks and the loads they are carrying today. Hence most of these bridges were built narrow, and a good many of them with a ten-ton rating. Hundreds of these bridges are still rendering service. This creates a state-wide problem.

Some ten years ago George Gault, who was our County Engineer at that time, and I made a survey of the structures in Wayne County. In 730 miles of county roads, we found 3,405 structures, ranging in size from 12-inch culvert to structures up to 384-foot span. Many of the larger bridges were 16 feet wide, a few 18 feet, and some as little as 14 feet. These bridges were of steel construction with light I-beam stringers and wooden floors. Many of these bridges are carrying loads today of twice their original rated capacity. This constituted our problem, "What could we do with these obsolete structures?" I have no doubt that practically every road department represented in this Road School has a similar problem of greater or less urgency.

We separated these structures, listing all projects of 20-foot span and over as bridges. Those under 20 feet we listed as culverts. We roughly estimated that it would require one million dollars to replace the obsolete structures of more than 20-foot span. This was the figure that we arrived at some eight years ago. At present construction costs, this estimate would be much too low. With these data at hand, Mr. Gault

and I had several meetings with the Board of Commissioners. We suggested the raising of a bridge fund of \$50,000 a year from property tax. We felt this amount over a period of twenty years would in a large measure relieve our bridge problem.

In 1932, when all township roads were turned over to the counties and the motor-vehicle fund came into being as our only source of revenue, this problem of bridges must have been anticipated by our legislators. In the law of that year it stated that the motor-vehicle fund was to be used for the construction and maintenance of all county highways and the *minor repair of bridges*. They evidently could foresee that few counties could rebuild their bridges out of this fund without crippling their road department. Some of you may be able to do this. You are very fortunate if you can. Most of us have been sorely pressed for funds to maintain roads, and only minor repair of bridges can be handled on current budgets.

The legislature took care of the bridge problem by authorizing the sale of county bonds for the construction of new bridges. I understand the Attorney General ruled in 1941 that a bridge fund could also be raised, in advance, by tax levy, thus making it possible to carry on a bridge program without selling bonds, paying interest, and being delayed by this method of raising money.

I want it understood that I am not an attorney and am not able to give you the exact page, chapter, and volume of the Acts where you can find these rulings. Our County Attorney has passed this on to us; and since it has passed all tests by the State Board of Accounts, the Tax Board, and other agencies, I know from experience that it is workable.

The first year we asked for \$58,000. This specific figure was the estimated cost of four particular bridges we wished to build the first year. Since then we have put into the commissioners' budget each year the same amount, *but have not specified just what bridges were to be built*.

This gives us \$58,000 each year in a special bridge fund, available each January first. This fund is approved by the County Council with the understanding and the approval of the State Board of Accounts that it is to be used for new bridge construction only. According to a ruling of the State Highway Commission, which we follow, a bridge must be at least a 20-foot span and those under 20 feet are designated as culverts.

Bridges must be designed and sold under contract. In no case is the County Highway Department permitted to use any part of this fund. But I surmise that a major repair job on a bridge could be taken care of from this fund if specifications were written and it was sold on a con-

tract. This fund can also be used to match federal-aid money for the construction of bridges on the Federal-Aid Secondary System.

Our annual allocation for the past two years from federal-aid funds was \$22,000. This, with our regular bridge fund appropriation, has given us \$80,000 each year for bridges. Without this fund I know of no way for us to have used federal-aid money in the construction of bridges.

This plan has been in operation for three years. We have completed one federal-aid bridge. The second federal-aid bridge, a span of 160 feet, is just now being started. Two smaller bridges are in the process of being planned, and we hope they can be sold this year.

We have built seven bridges with this county fund. The eighth bridge is just now being completed. Approximately \$40,000 is available for the construction of bridges from the county fund yet this year.

Now, I would not want to mislead you into believing that a County Highway Bridge Fund is as easily obtained as it would appear from just what I have told you. If you cannot take ridicule, if you cannot stand to be cussed and discussed, don't attempt any project that will add from sixty to seventy thousand dollars of additional tax money. People simply will not accept that amount of additional taxes without a struggle.

After making our survey, Mr. Gault and I discussed our bridge problem many times with the Board of Commissioners during 1942 and 1943. We were convinced that something should be done. We were also convinced that a plan to raise the money before the bridges were constructed would be a more businesslike plan, as well as more economical. After we had convinced ourselves that this plan was right and economically sound, it was placed in the Commissioners' Budget in 1944. The same year the County Council turned it down.

After taking much ridicule and devoting continued effort at selling the idea, utilizing the aid of several influential men and the press, it was again placed in the budget in 1945. That year it passed the County Council and was turned down by the Tax Review Board.

After still more ridicule from the public, but with still more determination and selling, it was again placed in the budget of 1946, and passed with flying colors. This made the funds available to use as of January 1, 1947, just as the Federal-Aid Secondary funds came into effect. Since we could match this \$22,000 fund, a total of \$80,000 for bridges was thus made available. From this amount we have been able so far to construct nine bridges, one 160-foot span just being started and others planned.

We have ceased to have any criticism or objections to our County Bridge Fund. The only trouble that I can see, under the present high cost of operation, is that the amount of the bridge fund is much too small. However, it has been a life-saver to us, and without it, I fail to see how we could have met some of our emergencies.

This is our partial solution to the ever-increasing county highway bridge problem.